

REDEEMING FEAR: A CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY FOR LIVING INTO HOPE

Jason C. Whitehead

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Context

The last two-and-a-half decades have been marked by a veritable explosion of research in the neurosciences, sparked in part by President George H.W. Bush's promotion and government financing during the 1990s—dubbed the “Decade of the Brain.” President Obama's recent announcement of a massive federally funded program to map the human brain, with an announced scope similar to mapping the human genome, suggests that our neuroscientific explorations will likely accelerate in the years ahead, along with our apparent fascination with these discoveries.

One visible result of this research enterprise has been the application of neuroscientific research to a vast array of human endeavors. Neuroeconomics, neuroaesthetics, and neuroanthropology are just three examples of recent developments that have joined the more established field of neuropsychology. Of perhaps even more interest to pastoral theologians are the newer fields of neuroethics and neurotheology. Across disciplines, the sciences have been recruited in both responsible and sometimes in less careful ways. The press to apply brain research in such a variety of settings has led at least one scholar to decry the “neurononsense” (Scruton in van Huyssteen and Wiebe, 2011, pp. 338-356).

Psychotherapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists have led the way in exploring neuroscientific foundations of attachment, affect, and narrative. (See, for example, Schore, 1994; Siegel, 1999; Cozolino, 2002.) A few practical theologians have been studying the brain sciences in search of deeper understandings of human experience and of our religious practices, particularly in liturgy and religious education. My earlier *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past* was first published in 2003, and within the domain of psychology of religion, Kelly Bulkeley published *The Wondering Brain: Thinking about Religion with and beyond Cognitive Neuroscience* in 2005. Jason Whitehead's *Redeeming Fear* is a recent entry, and one that demonstrates responsible, careful use of contempo-

rary scientific research within the broader tasks of pastoral theology.

Whitehead engages a thoughtful interdisciplinary methodology in sketching scientific and evolutionary descriptions of fear and then engaging process theology as a conversation partner. The central argument of the book is nicely captured in the title *Redeeming Fear*. It serves as a kind of double entendre since Whitehead first “redeems” fear by deconstructing our bias about fear as an emotion to be avoided, minimized, or defeated and then deftly suggests that fear is itself redeeming. Fear is deeply embodied in our mind-brain-bodies, and for eons fear has kept living organisms and entire species alive; it is overdetermined in human experience, but its very force has made survival possible. At the same time, fear produces more than the avoidance of threat; at its core, fear prompts survival, which for Whitehead implies hope. “Fear does not just protect us *from* a threat or trauma; it protects us *for* something as well” (Whitehead, 2013, p. 6).

Format

Redeeming Fear is divided into four sections. In the first, the author makes the case for a deeper understanding of emotions broadly and of fear specifically. He distinguishes fear from anxiety and notes the ways societies communicate fear. The second section provides an accessible description of the physiological and evolutionary reality of fear (its “embodied” state) as well as the role of fear in human relationships.

The third section introduces process theology (again in a very accessible way for those less familiar with its form and content) and further develops the relationship between fear and hope. Both are “anticipatory emotions” and draw on past experience to predict possible future outcomes. “To be hopeful in this world is to be passionate about the now and the next” (Whitehead, 2013, p. 94). It is here that Whitehead’s methodology becomes particularly apparent, noting that science and theology provide responses to different questions. “Neuroscience can tell us about the need to survive and cope with hostile experiences in the world. What it cannot tell us is why we bother surviving in the first place; or why we seek to thrive in a world that might have beaten us down and given us reason to fear the next moment. Those are questions of meaning” (Whitehead, 2013, p. 95).

Of particular interest to the author is the traditional notion of God’s impassability. Consistent with process theology, he draws on biblical stories of God (and Jesus) being affectively moved by human suffering, sin, and redemption, which affirms God’s deep involvement in the matters of human living, relating, and dying. “Empath-ability” is the term he proposes to capture God’s

identification with human experience—a term which will likely resonate with pastoral theologians for whom empathy has long been valued as a central dimension of pastoral caregiving.

The fourth and final section of the book moves from theory to practice, introducing narrative practices of resistance to the despair that fear can produce. The author here develops a theme first introduced in section one: religious and political leaders, as well as pundits, commonly instill fear in the public in order to manipulate choices toward their own agendas. Yet pastoral and other leaders can counter fear by making simple stories more complex. The concluding chapter of the book draws on Micah's threefold walk with God: kindness, humility, and justice to shape responses to specific fears. Whitehead insightfully sees kindness as an antidote to our fear of dependence, humility as counteracting our fear of being ordinary, and justice as a response to our fear of being wrong. The penultimate chapter ("Perfect Love Casts Out Fear") was, for this reader, a real gem.

Assessment

Redeeming Fear makes a strong contribution both to pastoral theology and to the broader science-and-religious-practices conversation. Whitehead's understanding of, and respect for, evolutionary processes represents a refreshing theological move, locating humanity within the broader narratives of God's unfolding world. At the same time, his careful incorporation of the neurosciences avoids the temptation to overstate the value of brain research in "explaining" human experience—a temptation not all writers have avoided. The book's focus and purpose are consistently theological. *Redeeming Fear* is free therefore to make a persuasive case for the more limited role such findings can have in the work of practical theology.

This reader had one minor quibble. Whitehead rightly observes that the media, along with religious and political leaders, often fosters fear. He also notes that "terrorism, crime, socialism, and loss of freedom are all small examples of stories that engender fearful responses. Yet most of us in the United States will not directly experience a threat related to one of these categories. At best they function as imagined threats that create discord in our lives and interrupt our ability to love and care for one another" (Whitehead, 2013, p. 117). Living near Chicago, the recently named "Murder Capital of the U.S.," we cannot look beyond the widespread violence in our neighborhoods. These frightful stories do indeed make encountering the stranger and empathizing with those who are different problematic. But significant segments of our population live with very real crime, loss of freedom, and at times even terrorism.

Nonetheless, *Redeeming Fear* is a very welcome addition to the growing literature in pastoral theology and models a faithful, responsible informing of the ways we understand and care for each other, as well as the obstacles to our loving that come with our evolutionary inheritance. The book makes effective use of vignettes (a victim of a mugging, a recently “converted” survivalist, and a community church), and each chapter concludes with a helpful list of guiding questions for discussion. The tone of the work is conversational, making it accessible to non-scholars, though this does nothing to detract from the rigorous scholarship behind the work or the important implications it has for religious life. This reader hopes that we will see more work of this quality from Dr. Whitehead.

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